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ABSTRACT

By focusing on Frederick Douglass' reconsideration of literacy in the 1845 "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass," this slave narrative becomes very relevant to students today. This important historical document becomes a powerful tool with which educators can encourage students to confront contemporary, postmodern questions about discursive oppression and individual resistance. As Douglass' "Narrative" demonstrates, slavery requires an absolute hierarchy of privileged literacy reserved for European-Americans and subordinate silence required of African-American slaves. Douglass, however, exposes the false rationale on which this system is based. Students of the "Narrative" should analyze Douglass' subversive use of silence, orality, and literacy, rather than just tracing his apparent pathway to freedom. Douglass's autobiographical self effectively uses silence to resist servitude. To undermine his master's authority, Douglass refuses to obey commands, such as when he declines to sing a hymn during a service. Faced with other exigencies of oppression, Douglass also uses orality to resist his enslavement. After his master prohibits any further instruction, Douglass uses bits of bread and friendly conversation to gain reading lessons from "poor white children." Further, by asserting the inexpressibility of certain experiences, Douglass opposes modernist conceptions of language and literacy. According to modernism, language simply names a person's inevitable reality and literacy encodes and decodes these names. However, Douglass uses the power of language to conceive his own reality. (Contains 26 references and 11 notes.) (TB)

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Literacy, Orality, and Silence: 'Reading' the Exigencies of Oppression in Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*

by Donald C. Jones

In his 1845 *Narrative* , Frederick Douglass acquires literacy through remarkable ingenuity. For example, as Douglass works in a Baltimore boatyard, he watches carpenters mark timbers with initials like "S. F." Douglass soon learns the shapes and the names of these letters, and this knowledge makes him aware of a timber's intended position on the starboard forward (280). Like these letters, literacy initially helps Douglass to orient himself within an oppressive society. In this presentation, I will show that, as his literacy becomes more critical, this knowledge enables Douglass to not only to re-position himself but also to redesign the American ship of state. This slave narrator uses literacy to reconsider literacy itself and many other values of the dominant culture. By focusing on Douglass' reconsideration of literacy, the 1845 *Narrative* becomes even more relevant to the lives of our students. This important historical document becomes a powerful pedagogical tool with which we, as instructors, can encourage our students to confront contemporary, postmodern questions about discursive oppression and individual resistance. 1

Before our students begin this examination of Douglass' *Narrative* , it is important that they recognize that literacy, since Puritan times, has been a central concern of American culture. With this understanding

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of Douglass' cultural context, students will not find it difficult to focus on literacy within the *Narrative* because his autobiographical character identifies literacy as his "pathway from slavery to freedom" (275), and this quest for literacy serves as the "metaphor of self" with which the author Douglass structures his slave narrative (Olney 35). The passage just quoted, in which Douglass' autobiographical self overhears Hugh Auld denying him any further literacy instruction, is probably one of the first students will want to examine. For this scene establishes the relationship between literacy and slavery. As Hugh Auld explains, he fears literacy will make Douglass "unfit . . . to be a slave" because it could, and does in fact, provide Douglass with a way to revise the power relations implicit within his masters' discourse (274). Literacy for a slave is "what [Auld] most dread[s]" and, therefore, becomes 'that [which Douglass] most desire[s]" (275). 2 In subsequent scenes, Douglass gradually acquires literacy, such as by writing in the blank spaces of a discarded copybook and by drawing near whenever the word 'abolition' is spoken in order to learn its meaning.

At some opportune moment in the examination of these literacy lessons, it may be helpful for the instructor to introduce the ongoing critical debate over Douglass' literacy because many contemporary critics have questioned the results of his literacy. Houston Baker warns, "Douglass grasps language in a Promethan act of will, but he leaves unexamined its potentially devastating effects" (38), and Valerie Smith is even more skeptical. She argues that the literate Douglass perpetuates "the very premises that contributed [to] his enslavement" (28). These critics place Douglass in the following paradox: most European-Americans will not deem the illiterate slave Douglass human,

2

but literacy only enslaves him in a more insidious form of servitude. Eric Sundquist, however, refers to this criticism as a "paranoid reading [that] . . . belittles both [Douglass'] intelligence and his craft" (90), and in a recent issue of the *African-American Review* , Daniel Royer argues that Douglass, through literacy, acts "to transform the dehumanizing structure of the dominant culture" (369). 3 Some students may not need these critical references to question Douglass' literacy because they may note his own ambivalence. Douglass, for example, states that reading *The Columbian Orator* "g[ives] tongue" to abolitionist thoughts which have "flashed through [his] mind, and died away for want of utterance," yet literacy also "open[s his] eyes to the horrible pit [of slavery] but to no ladder upon which to get out" (278, 279).

As students join this critical debate, it is important to keep Douglass' initial desire for literacy in its rhetorical context. As Douglass explains in chapter two, slaveholders expected their African-American property to be silent inferiors. Douglass' owner Col. Lloyd, for example, tolerates no response to his arbitrary complaints: "the slave must never answer a word . . . a slave must stand, listen, and tremble" (qtd. by MacKethan "From" 60, Douglass 265). The aptly named overseer Mr. Severe controls slaves with his flailing whip that "caus[es] the blood to run" and his words that were "enough to chill the blood" (qtd. by MacKethan "From" 59, Douglass 261). The slave maxim that "a still tongue makes a wise head" reveals that just as a whip can tear flesh from a slave's back, a master's violent outburst cuts language from an enslaved African-American's tongue (266).

As Douglass' *Narrative* demonstrates, slavery requires an absolute hierarchy of privileged literacy reserved for European-Americans /

intermediate orality / and subordinate silence required by African-American slaves. Col. Lloyd's bountiful fruit garden, described in chapter two, symbolizes this rigid hierarchy. Col. Lloyd forbids his slaves from taking any fruit from this Edenic garden, and any slave thought disobedient was "severely whipped" (264). Like this forbidden fruit, literacy for slaves was illegal and strictly punished in antebellum, Southern states (Davis and Gates xxiv-v). This artificial barrier reserved the 'fruit' of literacy for European-Americans and restricted African-Americans to silence and slavery. As Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates explain, African-Americans were falsely reduced to sub-human status based upon the specious correlation of skin color, race, literacy, reason, and humanity. For centuries, Europeans had associated literacy with reason, and reason with humanity. By denying African-American slaves literacy, their masters could falsely consider them to be non-rational, and therefore sub-human, creatures whom, they rationalized, would benefit from the peculiar institution of slavery (xxiv). 4

When a master and a slave meet at the intermediate level of orality, a slave risks revealing the reason that illiterate slaves do, in fact, possess and their masters deny. 5 As Douglass demonstrates in chapter four, when an overseer orders a slave named Demby to submit to a whipping, he -- and every other master -- actually addresses a slave as a human being with sufficient reason to comprehend and comply. Yet the rhetorical paradox of slavery is that, in response to a command, a slave must obey immediately and apparently automatically in order to confirm his subordinate status. If a slave reveals her own reason as she decides whether to and how to obey a command, then she places herself

4

in grave danger. For example, when the slave Demby refuses to submit to a whipping, he demonstrates his autonomous humanity; the overseer then must either relinquish his racist illusions or eliminate the "human counterevidence" (Kibbey 172). The overseer murders Demby by shooting him in the head which literally and symbolically "destroy[s] the slave's intelligence" upon which the commanding master actually depends (Goddu and Smith 835). This dependence on a slave's reason, however, cannot be acknowledged if his humanity is to be denied.

Like Demby, the author Douglass exposes the false rationale of slavery which requires "validating silence" from African-Americans in order to deny their humanity and their freedom (Kibbey 170). As students concentrate on literacy in Douglass' *Narrative* , my goal is that they analyze Douglass' subversive use of silence, orality, and literacy, rather than just tracing his apparent pathway to freedom. For I believe this deconstruction of slavery's hierarchy of literacy / orality / and silence proves Douglass' much debated freedom. Unlike Demby, Douglass' autobiographical self effectively uses silence to resist his servitude. To undermine his master's authority, Douglass refuses to obey a command: "He would read his hymn and nod at me to commence . . . My [occasional] non-compliance would almost always produce much confusion . . . . [then] he would stagger through his hymn" (qtd. by Goddu and Smith 835, Douglass 292). Douglass later repeats this subversive silence when Hugh Auld rages against his disobedience. 6

Faced with other exigencies of oppression, Douglass uses orality to resist his enslavement. After his master prohibits any further instruction, Douglass uses bits of bread and friendly conversation to gain reading lessons from "poor white children" (278). When he later

5

encounters the cruel slave breaker named Covey, Douglass relieves his despair by uttering his eloquent Chesapeake Bay apostrophe. By orally "pour[ing] out [his] soul's complaint," Douglass summons the strength to endure and eventually escape his enslavement (293). Again, in the much discussed passage on slaves' spiritual songs, Douglass thinks "the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes . . . on the subject could do" (263). In other words, emotional orality sometimes can surpass studious literacy as effective persuasion for abolition. 7

Douglass' description of his first, unsuccessful escape epitomizes his subtle deconstruction of slavery's absolute hierarchy of privileged literacy / orality / and subordinate silence. At first, freedom is linked to literacy when Douglass writes several forged passes granting himself and four others permission to travel. Yet when this plan is thwarted, these written passes document their guilt so these slaves destroy this evidence of Douglass' literacy. Through a pun, Douglass transforms these written texts into an oral message when he "pass[es]" the word to "Own nothing" (310). This oral instruction to maintain deceptive silence helps them avoid being sold to slave traders. At each turn of this foiled escape, Douglass' autobiographical character 'reads' the exigencies of his oppression and employs the most effective response.

Douglass' composition of the *Narrative* also demonstrates this contextual use of silence, orality, and literacy to maximize his freedom. This slave narrator explicitly remains silent on the details of his second, successful escape attempt. Through this deliberate omission, Douglass rhetorically enslaves his oppressors in a series of well-crafted

clauses, such as "I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant" and "I would leave him . . . surrounded by myriads of [imagined] tormentors" (qtd. by MacKethan "From" 63, Douglass 316).

The orality recorded in the *Narrative* similarly resists William Lloyd Garrison's encroachments. In his authenticating preface, Garrison portrays himself as the central figure of the 1841 Nantucket Anti-Slavery Convention (Goddu and Smith 833). 8 Yet through Douglass' own depiction of this event, he resists Garrison's attempted domination. Although he initially feels like a slave burdened by "the idea of speaking to white people," Douglass' character soon experiences a "degree of freedom" and speaks with "considerable ease" (326). This powerful orality renders Garrison an unnamed and unheard member of Douglass' audience (Albert Stone cited by Stepto 25).

Instead of writing the *Narrative* merely to verify the facts of his abolitionist speeches as Garrison would have desired, Douglass uses literacy to maximize his freedom by asserting his right to evaluate his own slave past. During Douglass' depiction of his struggle with Covey, the often-quoted sentence: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" is famous for its stylistic virtuosity, but it is also remarkable for its evaluation of events and its commanding tone (Douglass 294, MacKethan "From" 65). As he composed the *Narrative* , Douglass also provides his own "internalized documentation" and a satirical authentication in order to again take "control of his own narrative" (Stepto 23, Couser *Altered* 151). 9

As Douglass displays this strategic use of silence, orality, and literacy according the exigencies of his oppression, he also questions the efficacy of literacy itself in order to finally shatter the specious

correlation of skin color, race, literacy, reason, and humanity. In the *Narrative* 's first depiction of "the hell of slavery," Douglass asserts the limitations of literacy to render experience fully. As this slave narrator describes the whipping of Aunt Hester, Douglass wishes he "could commit to paper the feelings with which [he] beheld" this "terrible spectacle" (258). This assertion of the inadequacy of literacy to express his humanity severs their association by which slavery was rationalized. During his failed escape attempt, Douglass again insists,

> I have no language to express [our] high excitement and deep anxiety . . . We had no more voice in that decision [regarding their punishment] than the brutes among whom we were ranked. A single word from the white men was enough. (282)

Even as Douglass concedes his masters' momentary linguistic dominance, he denies his own ranking among sub-human brutes by the false correlation of literacy and humanity. This rhetoric of inexpressibility portrays the slaveholders as inhuman because their cruelty is unspeakable and the slaves as profoundly human because language and literacy cannot convey their suffering (Couser *Altered* 132).

By asserting the inexpressibility of certain experiences, Douglass implicitly opposes modernist conceptions of language and literacy. According to modernism, language simply names one's inevitable reality and literacy encodes and decodes these names. Yet Douglass and the critics who question his pathway to freedom rightly reject these modernist conceptions of language and literacy. By learning the literacy of European-American culture, Douglass was taught the ideologies of racist slaveholders and paternalistic abolitionists. Yet the critics who doubt Douglass' greater freedom fail to recognize that Douglass wrests

the power of language to name away from his masters and uses literacy to reconceive his reality. They assume a structuralist theory of language in which an individual is believed to participate passively in a pre-existing language system. They deny Douglass any agency to alter the dominant discourse or they refuse to declare him free as long as any discursive obstacles remain. They assume a negative concept of freedom, meaning free from external constraints, that is more compatible with modernism than structuralism (Szkudlarek 42-43).

Yet as Douglass demonstrates, individuals can be free according to its positive concept, meaning free to act, if they exploit the multiple discourses that comprise language. 10 Thus, the critical question regarding literacy should not be whether Douglass can entirely free himself from the constraints of the dominant discourses, but how does he find ways to be relatively more free by acting within yet often against these discursive practices? And this is the same crucial question for our students to ask themselves about their educations, especially any non-privileged students, such as African-Americans. Are they learning a foreign, self-alienating discourse as Valerie Smith contends and as Richard Rodriquez depicts in his autobiography? Or can they reject these structuralist assumptions about language and literacy and instead develop what Paulo Freire calls critical consciousness? I believe that our students can develop their own critical consciousness if we encourage them to do so, for example, by examining Douglass' exemplary model of critical literacy. For in the 1845 Narrative , Douglass does not just reproduce the dominant discourses of nineteenth century America; he reconstructs them. 11 By analyzing Douglass' subversive deconstruction and his productive reconstruction of

slavery's rigid hierarchy of literacy / orality / and silence as well as of the dominant discourses of Christian faith, patriarchal economics, and democratic liberty, our students can develop their own critical literacy with which they can seek greater freedom as Frederick Douglass successfully did.

NOTES

1. I woud like to thank Sarah Sherman for encouraging me to pursue this project and Lisa Sisco with whom I have exchanged various drafts of our separate studies of Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* .

2. When Douglass describes practicing his letters by "writing in the spaces left in master Thomas' copybook," he suggests that his basic literacy initially reproduces the dominant discourses (Goddu and Smith 827). Yet Douglass soon uses literacy to do more than simply decode and encode the names previously given to various aspects of reality by his masters' language. He instead wrests the power of language to name away from his masters and uses literacy to reconceive the reality of slavery. When Douglass explicitly names his oppressors in the *Narrative* , he is "binding them to his [discursive] space" wherein, for example, Mr. Freeland becomes the subject of his puns and Mr. Gore, the victim of his irony (MacKethan "From" 66). After he leaves Covey's farm, Douglass describes his better situation with Mr. Freeland, yet he adds, "by this time, I began to want to live upon free land as well as with Freeland " (original italics 305). In contrast, Mr. Gore "was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man" because as an overseer at the plantation, he "was just proud enough to demand the most debasing homage of the slave, and quite servile enough to crouch, himself, at the feet of his master" (267). Douglass rhetorically is no longer occupying the marginal spaces left blank by his masters; rather, he is confining them in reconstructed spaces in which slaveowners are renamed as pirates, robbers, kidnappers, and monsters (MacKethan "Metaphors" 63).

3. Since Houston Baker questioned the outcome of Dougalass' literacy in *The Journey Back* (1980), over a dozen critics have commented on this controversial topic. Like Baker, Annette Niemtzow argues that the literate Douglass functions "within his masters wishes' (101), and Teresa Goddu and Craig Smith also consider Douglass' literacy to be "a peculiar form of bondage and freedom . . . [wherein] language can betray" (840). Thad Ziolkowski recently restated these doubts by claiming that through his literacy " a gulf [is] created between Douglass and his [African-American] community" (156). Others, such as Albert Stone, view Douglass' quest for literacy and freedom as "a bitter, conditionally successful struggle" (121). And Keith Byerman, like Sundquist and Royer, is even more optimistic because he believes Douglass' "accomodation [of northern white readers] does not necessarily imply that [he] gives unconditional support to [their values]" ("We" 75). Like Royer who cautions, "our understanding of the . . . effects of literacy hinge on our theories of literacy" (364), I think it is essential to examine the structuralist assumptions of those who deny Douglass any beneficial agency towards the dominant discourses.

4. As Lucinda MacKethan states, African-American slaves had to overcome the paradox that "one had to know one's letters in order to be free, but in America, one had to be free in order to learn one's letters" ("From" 56). Even when the slave Phyllis Wheatley learned her letters and published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in 1773, apologists for slavery argued that Wheatley's erudition proved that slaves benefitted from the peculiar institution.

5. As Anne Kibbey explains, "the reality of slavery is a profoundly rhetorical one" in which an "unacknowledged linguistic reciprocity" exists (163, 171). With every question and command, a slave must use quick reasoning to determine the proper response or risk harsh punishment. Douglass, for example, describes an incident in which a slave was approached, unbeknownst to him, by his own owner Col Lloyd. As the owner of over 1,000 slaves, Col Lloyd did not direct contact with many who served him, including this slave. When asked by his unrecognized master about his treament, this slave answered truthfully about his mistreatment. For this honesty, this slave was sold down river, never to see his family again. Douglass concludes, "This is the penalty [for] telling the truth" (265-66). Because of this profoundly rhetorical danger of slavery, Henry Louis Gates asserts,

> Black people have always been masters of the figurative . . . . Misreading signs could be, and often was, fatal, 'Reading,' in this sense, was not play; it was an essential act of the 'literacy' training. . . . learning to decipher complex codes, is just about the the blackest aspect of the black tradition. ("Criticism" 6)

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Through this sophisticated semiotic literacy that even most 'illiterate' slaves possessed, some slaves found a "middle ground" between submissive accomodation and open rebellion. According to Keith Byerman, some slaves like Douglass created a "strategic resistance . . . . characterized by a refusal to accept the imposed definitions of black life but a simultaneous refusal to rebel openly" (*Fingering* 88).

6. Douglass again demonstrates this subversive silence when Hugh Auld discovers that he has not been hiring out his time as a paid laborer in Baltimore as they had agreed: "he raved, and swore his determination to get hold of me. I did not allow myself a single word" (qtd. by Goddu and Smith 835, Douglass 318).

7. Douglass' description of these spiritual songs has proven to be a crucial passage within the larger debate about his literacy. Douglass is ambiguous about his own relationship with the "unmeaning jargon" of these songs so "full of meaning" (263); he claims he did not understand fully these spiritual songs when he was a youth "within the circle of slavery" (263). As the mature author, Douglass, in retrospect, insists on the profound significance of this orality. Unlike those who interpret this singing as "evidence of . . . contentment," Douglass compares spirituals to the tears that relieve "an aching heart" (263). Albert Stone explains that only the double perspective of a free African-American, such as Douglass, is capable of comprehending these incoherent/meaningful songs. Yet those who question Douglass' literacy emphasize his own admission of his incomprehension of the spirituals in order to argue that literacy "alienate[s him] from the black culture that has nurtured [his] independence and will" (CouserAmerican 25). Yet this criticism reverses the chronology of Douglass' admission; if literacy alienates Douglass from his original and authentic African-American self, then he should be able to understand these songs when he is a young slave and notafter he acquires the dominant culture's literacy. Yet Douglass asserts the opposite. As Eric Sunquist explains, Douglass' assertion that he did not fully understand these songs while a slave is "probably [a] specious claim" which serves as "a rhetorical gesture to draw readers . . . into a sympatheitc understanding of [their] double meaning" (128, 92).

8. In his authenticating preface, Garrison portrays himself as the central figure of the 1841 Nantucket Anti-Slavery Convention that Douglass also depicts in his final chapter. According to Garrison's account, it is he who rises, asks Douglass to serve his cause, and finally exhorts the audience to end slavery. Garrison usurps Douglass and reduces him to an unrecognized, silent subordinate (Goddu and Smith 833).

12

9. Douglass provides his own "internalized documentation" by reproducing his own forged pass and his own satirical authentication by "soberly affirm[ing]" that a poem included in the appendix is "true to life, and without caricature or the slightest exaggeration" (Stepto 23, Douglass 329). By authenticating a poem entitled "A Parody" as a text "without exaggeration," Douglass mocks Garrison and takes "control of his own narrative" (Couser *Altered* 151).

10. Among his structuralists and poststructuralist colleagues, Michel Foucault comes closest to providing a postmodern account of individual freedom and agency. Towards the end of his career, Foucault "weakens his antimodernist edge" by revising the structuralist precedence of discursive practices to individual thought (Szkudlarek 55). For example, in "The Subject and Power" (1982), Foucault explains, power relations "in a given society, are multiple; they are superimposed, they cross . . . sometimes cancel each other out, sometimes reinforce each other" (224). To respond, even conventionally, to this complex matrix, an individual must be free: "Power is exercised only over free subjects" (221). Yet as Foucault revises his concept of power, he maintains the typical structuralist rhetoric towards the dominant discourse as an oppressive obstacle. Because of this rhetoric, a Foucauldian subject would reject the dominant discourses entirely, thereby depriving the subject of the necessary context of contingent beliefs upon which non-foundational knowledge depends. For more on the epistemological crisis of the subject whose agency Focault finally acknowledges yet still undermines, see Todd May, *Between Geneology and Epistemology* , 96-99).

11. Like the eighteenth century African-American poet Phyllis Wheatley, Douglass is able to reconceive the reality of slavery by exploiting the inconsistencies and contradictions within his masters' discourse. In terms of postmodern theory, Douglass' critical literacy deconstructs the dominant discourse in order to reconstruct his denied humanity and his owners' culpability. The critics G. Thomas Couser, Anne Kibbey, and Lucinda MacKethan each have analyzed how Douglass "forcefully adopt[s]" Christian faith as he compares his desire for freedom to a convert's yearning for grace from the first moment of his autobiographical character's awareness of slavery (Couser *American* 53). They agree that Douglass ultimately challenges the tenets of Christianity. Giles Gunn states that Douglass likewise manipulates the rhetoric of patriarchal economics in order to assert his own manhood (32). For example, when Douglass later hires out his own labor as a slave in Baltimore, he opposes being "compelled to deliver every cent to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it . . . but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up" (315). By claiming the economic right to profit from his own labors, Douglass appropriates Ben Franklin's myth of the

self-made man. This economic individualism is patriarchal when Douglass caps his tale of self-reliance by adding a wife, Anna Murray, as obscure as Franklin's own in the Autobiography (Niemtzow 102). Yet this objection overlooks the exigencies of Douglass' oppression. Douglass is claiming the right to profit from his own labor and to be a husband and father which slavery denied. Eric Sundquist examines Douglass' similar application of the secular discourse of democratic liberty, especially in his subsequent writings, to argue for the emancipation of slaves deemed only 3/5 of a human being by the Founding Fathers (112-113).

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14

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